

Veterans and post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, suggests by its name that a person has been traumatized. Trauma can be defined as either a physical or emotional injury that has potential long-lasting effects. There is a great deal of physical trauma in a war zone and veterans who have lost arms or legs, or have had extensive burns or other injuries, would probably agree that it was and still is a very traumatic physical experience.

Emotional trauma, on the other hand, is not something that battle-hardened veterans are as quick to acknowledge. Because of the extensive training and mental toughness that veterans had to develop to do their jobs in a hostile environment, accepting a "label" that suggests they might not have been tough enough is difficult.

A different perspective on PTSD

Consider taking the comparison between the physical trauma and the emotional trauma a little further. Battle armor, whether on a jeep, tank or worn by the veteran has become stronger through the years and save many lives. However, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) and other explosives have become more powerful too, tearing apart even some of the strongest armor and causing extensive physical trauma. Most people have not experienced a war zone and do not understand the destructive power of these weapons. While it would be ideal to have even stronger protection, neither the armor nor the person is blamed for being torn apart by a direct hit.

In the same way, veterans often take many emotional "direct hits" throughout their tour of duty - witnessing the death of a friend in combat, feeling helpless to

protect innocent civilians who are caught in crossfire, or having to make a split-second decision to kill a combatant or be killed. Veterans can experience this, as well as the "threat of death", every day for months at a time. The destructive power of these "direct emotional hits" can tear apart any mental armor. Neither the armor nor the veteran is considered to be at fault - it is an injury caused by explosive experiences.

Signs of potential injury from "direct emotional hits"

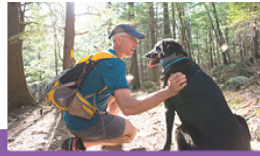
How can one tell if the stress of the direct mental and emotional "hits" one has sustained has penetrated the protective armor and caused an emotional injury? First, anticipate that even one "direct hit" can cause emotional injury, just as it does physical injury. Second, understand that the greater the number of "hits" a veteran endures, the more likely there is to be serious overall injury.

Below are a few signs that the stress from experiences in a war zone may have left injuries. All are common and expected reactions to traumatic stress.

Physical reactions

- Sudden and/or strong startle reaction to loud sounds or unexpected noises
- Fatigue
- Grinding teeth
- Headaches
- Breaking out in a sweat (not during physical activity)

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Cognitive reactions

- Unwanted, intrusive thoughts about past experiences
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares or unwanted dreams
- Confusion, difficulty making decisions, making poor decisions
- Being disoriented at times
- Increased or decreased alertness, or awareness

Behavioral reactions

- Increased alcohol (from prior to deployment)
- Drug use or abuse
- Not wanting to be around family and/or friends
- Increase or decrease in normal appetite (from prior to deployment)
- Fighting, sometimes with little or no provocation

Emotional reactions

- Agitated, irritable, intense anger
- Denial that anything is wrong; blaming others for actions or reactions
- Feeling sad, crying
- Feeling guilty, hopeless, depressed
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling afraid

Exhibiting any of these signs is normal for veterans who have been in an active war zone. If any of these reactions are causing distress, affecting relationships with family, friends or co-workers, or impacting the ability to be productive at work, contact your physician or a Veterans hospital for further assessment and to get help for the emotional wounds. A veteran would never deny a wounded friend help in a war zone. Treat yourself the same as you would a friend.

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